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ABSTRACT

American educational institutions have used the literature of a few Anglo men to represent American literature. The problem of this one-sided presentation was alleviated somewhat during the 1960s when publishers began to offer some works of ethnic writers, especially for elementary school children. This was the result of influence by the civil rights movement and the feminist movement, which made people aware that white men were not the only people who contributed to American literature. In the 1980s the discussions moved to the psychological impact of literature on the individual. Not only do multicultural reading materials enhance reading skills, but they also sharpen sensitivity on the commonalities of human experience and improve the self-esteem of racial and ethnic minorities. Some retrenchment has been in evidence in the past few years as ethnic literature has become less available than it was in the 1970s. Further, many recent books perpetuate common stereotypes and misconceptions about minorities. Some educators try to find the one book that encompasses the ethnic experience without realizing that no single work can represent the totality of a point of view. Others make the assumption that all books with ethnic characters are ethnic literature. Bibliographies with ethnic categories and identifiers can help educators to find and understand ethnic literature. (VM)

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Ethnic Children's Literature in the Schools

by FRANCES SMITH FOSTER

During the sixties when I taught in the secondary schools of Detroit, Michigan, two streams of thought came together in an interesting way. On the one hand, the civil rights movement was demanding an intergrated curriculum. Schools were being required to revise their texts to include information about and by people of color. Literature teachers, especially, were under fire to teach works which were relevant to the needs of all children. At the same time, the anxiety over what appeared to be an increasing preference for watching television over reading made us all anxious to "Get 'em Hooked on Books." The theory ~~being~~ WAS that it didn't matter what they read as long as they were reading.

Now, these were not entirely bad ideas. It is true that reading skills improve with use and that one is most inclined to read that which one finds interesting. And it is certainly true that the curriculum sorely needed color and, in fact, some contour as well. By and large, the educational institution was engaged in fraud because what it advertised as American literature, British literature and World literature was really not that at all. It was essentially the literature of a few Anglo men that other

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mostly Anglo men had decided represented "the best thoughts of the best minds."

These two factors worked together to produce some of the strangest lists of recommended readings for young people that one can imagine. Uncle Tom's Cabin and To Kill a Mockingbird lined up behind Native Son and The Dutchman. "After You, My Dear Alphonse" was an alternate for "Sonny's Blues" and if the class set of Black Boy was already reserved, one would simply have to substitute Black Like Me. ~~It was a~~ hurried and often haphazzard ~~solution~~ to significant ~~problems~~ and the results were, as one might expect, not quite what anyone really wanted. Teachers trained in European aesthetics were often frustrated in trying to analyze the blues poems of Langston Hughes. Black and white parents alike were sometimes horrified to discover their children reading books about drug addicts, pimps, and rapists with scenes graphically described in a profusion of four letter words. ~~And~~ children were hard pressed to understand the surrealism and abstractions of Invisible Man.

But we got through all that, I think, fairly well. Eventually things settled down. The problem which had been especially acute for the elementary grades was allievated somewhat as publishers began to offer works written specifically for young people. The works of talented writers such as Virginia Hamilton, Eloise Greenfield, Walter Dean Myers, Tom Feelings, Sharon Belle Mathis,

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John Steptoe, Lorenze Graham, Nikki Giovanni, June Jordan, and others became more readily available.

As a legacy of the civil rights movement and, later, the feminist movement, more people became aware that white men were not the only people who could -- and did -- contribute to the American literary tradition. And whether we personally agree or not, few of us are shocked to hear many imminent and respected scholars state that "opinion is the great canon-maker" and that "works of art come to be considered important not because of some shared inherent quality in them, but because they happen to seem valuable in terms of current taste and opinion" (Nodelman 3).

Today's discussions have moved beyond those of the sixties and the seventies when the struggle for equal opportunity surprised many with its critique of aesthetics, the literary canon, curricula, and artistic aspirations. Internationally recognized writers such as Virginia Hamilton, Maya Angelou, and James Baldwin have testified to the profound impact of their literary models upon not only their development of positive self identities but upon their own decisions to become writers. Autobiographies such as Richard Rodriquez' Hunger of Memory alert us to the psychological effects of literature and to the profound costs of ethnocentric literary exposure. Such testimony reminds us that writers also function as role models and witnesses and that the inclusive view of our literary heritage not only expands our appreciation of the

tradition and ensures its continuation, but it facilitates the development of healthy and productive individuals.

Personal testimony has been documented by research. Studies have found that multicultural materials enhance the reading comprehension and problem solving skills of all children and that both children who are white and children of color have improved attitudes towards themselves and each other after studying racial heritages and cultures (Campbell and Wirtenberg 3).

We are almost a generation away from the turbulent 60's when assertions of racism and demonstrations of literary bigotry brought forth a slew of books by or about Afro-Americans and bibliographies and dramatically changed the nature of children's literature. Then Nancy Larrick could prove that of the 5206 children's books (including books about Africa and the Caribbean) published between 1962 and 1964, 93.7% did not include a black in its text or illustrations (64). And as Nilsen and Donelson have pointed out, during the first 47 years of the Newbery award only three winners ~~featured~~ American protagonists of color (426). However, In 1963 the Caldecott Medal went to Jack Ezra Keats for A Snowy Day, one of the first picture books to have a black protagonist with whom most children could positively identify. In 1974 Virginia Hamilton's M.C. Higgins, the Great became the first book to win the triple crown of children's literature: the Boston Globe - Horn Book Award, the Newbery Medal and the National Book

Award. And, during the 1970s, five out of the ten Newbery winners featured people of color.

Today most introductory texts on children's literature assert as Through the Eyes of a Child that "reading programs should include literature by and about members of all cultural groups." And while some prefer to mainstream and others devote separate units to multicultural literature, few disagree with Donna Norton, that "Literature is an appropriate means of building respect across cultures, sharpening sensitivity toward the ways in which all individuals have much in common, and improving the self-esteem of people who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups" (502).

Such recognition has not only resulted in the inclusion of ethnic literature in most anthologies, reading lists and libraries, but it has also paved the way for our more serious consideration of literatures from other countries. Roy Stokes' advice in the opening address of the first Pacific Rim Conference on Children's Literature typifies our new awareness: "All that we do, all that we say, all that we discuss . . . is simply that we may better understand the child and the book and that relationship. And if each of us can think of children and books beyond our own country and our own language, then the situation becomes obviously both more complex and more exciting" (Egoff vi).

In 1987 one might assume that our schools have got it all together -- at least as far as ethnic literature is concerned. And yet, this is not so. ~~Researchers have discovered that~~ the number of children's books with Black or Native American protagonists did increase, but this was not true for Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans. In 1976, the Asian American Children's Book Project identified only 66 books with Asian American protagonists and most of these were Chinese-Americans. Sonia Nieto, in "Children's Literature on Puerto Rican Themes" stated that in 1980 not one U.S. book of fiction for children about Puerto Ricans was published (6). ~~In a presentation to a recent conference on children's literature at University of Texas, Mauricio Charpenel, consultant to the Mexican Ministry of Education, reported that~~ very few stories or poems are written for or about Mexican or Mexican American children.

Moreover, literature for children by or, even, about people of color is less available now than it was ten years ago. Between 1974 and 1984, for example, the number of in-print children's books about blacks decreased from 950 titles to 450. Moreover between 1980 and 1983, the number of new books that focused upon American blacks averaged about 20 a year. That is about 1% of the children's books published during that time (Sims "Status Report" 9). For other ethnic groups, it is worse.

Coupled with the decrease in books that focus upon people of color, is the added problem which Isabel Schon argues that the

"overwhelming majority of recent books incessantly repeat the same stereotypes, misconceptions, and insensibilities that were prevalent in the books published in the 1960's and the early 1970's." Schon was speaking from her study of Hispanic images in recent literature and particularly of the "stereotypes of poverty, children's embarrassment about their backgrounds, distorted and negative narratives about pre-Columbian history and simplistic discussions of serious Latin American problems," but her conclusions may be applied more generally.

The problem today is not identical to that of twenty years ago. Though today most school systems officially endorse inclusive literature, such an endorsement is not always practiced. Our acts have not kept followed our intentions. Some educators -- not us, here, of course, but folks we know -- have decided that that fad is over and we are back to the basics (the basics being of course those wonderful classics of yore: Those without people of color: Hamlet, The Scarlet Letter and Catcher in the Rye or those with stereotyped and problematic characters: Othello, The Last of the Mohicans or any of Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales, or Huckleberry Finn) Others maintain that ethnic literature is important for schools with sizeable ethnic student populations, but since there are very few in their particular classrooms, it really isn't so important. Some of us are still trying to find the one book that best describes the ethnic experience, neglecting to realize as Alleen Nilson and Kenneth Donelson, among others, have pointed out that "It is the grossest kind of overgeneralizing for teachers,

librarians, and reviewers to present books to kids and to discuss them as if any single book represents THE black point of view or THE Asian-American point of view, etc." (423). Others of us have confused books with ethnic characters with books that are ethnic literature. And I mean that in at least two ways. Books by whites about Asians are not Asian books; they are books by whites about Asians. And books with characters who are identified as ethnic may or may not be representative of that group. While we do acknowledge the existence of our various heritages, we may not be actually experiencing them. Many of us have chosen a favorite ethnic representative and failed to keep pace with developments in the literature. Thus, when we discover that our favorite is no longer in print, or, alas, that our students are no longer enthralled with the dilemma of M.C. Higgins, the Great, our token has lost its value and we have missed the bus.

I could go on, but I think the thesis is clear. Ethnic literature is not alive and well. As Spencer G. Shaw noted at the 1983 American Library Association meeting, "Once again the threatening wind is sweeping across the land, causing the pendulum of ethnic and cultural progress to swing back as the forces of conservatism and bigotry seek to corrode the democratic ideal. For the past several years there has been a noticeable decrease in books that portray ethnic and cultural minority groups as other subjects are becoming the concern of publishers" (qtd in Nilsen and Donnelson 422). Racism is still an issue. A disproportionately large number of the books on censors lists are by and about ethnics.

Fewer ethnic writers are being published and more racist books are winning awards. (Jake and Honeybunch Go to Heaven, Big Sixteen, others are simply problematic: Words by Heart, Shadow by Marcia Brown, Sounder, Slave Dancer, etc.)

Some of the problem lies with the publishers, but they--after all--are in business. If schools and individuals are not concerned enough to buy books that include positive or balanced portraits of ethnic people, then why expect the publishers to publish them? It's a complicated issue, I know, but I think the crux of the matter is still the question of canon. I have no magic solutions, but one small step is the creation and use of bibliographies by ethnic identification.

Bibliographies by ethnic identification can serve the same functions as bibliographies by nationality, genre, era, or theme. As resources, lists of works grouped by some common factor, they can make our jobs of selecting representative materials easier. By delineating the works that compromise a particular cultural tradition and thereby acknowledging the concurrent existence of various artistic traditions, they can prevent the unnecessary anguish of a young James Baldwin who did did not know his literary inclinations were but part of a tradition that included Aesop, Alexander Dumas, and the Pulitzer Prize winner and later Poet Laureate of the United States, Gwendolyn Brooks. They can prevent the embarrassment of those inclined to believe that Joel Chandler Harris invented Brer Rabbit or that Porgy and Bess is authentic

Afro-American folk literature. They can mitigate the frustration of a young Ntozake Shange who almost stopped reading because she was tired of Pooh Bear and Pippi Longstocking and didn't know about Toussaint L'Overture, Harriet Tubman, or even Anansi the Spider. They can silence the objections of those who question the authenticity of language and experience in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl or who are wont to dismiss Joyce Carol Thomas' Golden Pasture because it is set in Oklahoma.

Such bibliographies can introduce new writers, new titles and new subject matter as they expand our ideas of literary history and traditions. Expansion can begin with contemplation of the lists themselves. One discovers, for example, that Afro-Americans did not begin to write for children in the last twenty years but that such writings were popular in the 1940's, the twenties, and even in ante-bellum times. Such knowledge makes the discovery that there was more Afro-American literature for children available in 1977 than there is in 1987 even more disquieting. When one sees that the earliest children's book in Spanish published in the United States was a translated French tale, issued in 1808 as Pablo y Virginia and that there were enough sales to merit a second edition in 1810, the image of nineteenth century readers takes on a new hue (Dale 3). Likewise, pictures of nineteenth century classrooms must change upon discovery that the earliest bilingual Spanish/English book was McGuffey's First Spanish-English Reader published in 1891. (Dale 4).

And finally, bibliographies by ethnic identification can help us see the absence, hear the silences, of writers whose works are not available. When we see the precipitous decline of new titles by or about particular groups, subjects, or attitudes, we can at least be aware of the threatened extinction. Maurice Sendak's comments about publishers of picture books may be applied more widely, "If talent is around but nobody is using it, what is wrong. . . . It seems to me that publishers are less ambitious than they used to be, in general less brave, less willing to go out on a limb. . . . when I turn around I see very few young people climbing up the mountain" (331).

As teachers and professionals, we can have some impact. At least once a year, we choose which books we will include in our classrooms, libraries, and research and which ones we will not. Our choices help determine what books are even available for choosing. Those titles and authors adopted by schools and libraries are more likely to remain in print and to be adopted again. Moreover, our students perpetuate our choices by reading, discussing, and introducing others to the authors and the kinds of literature with which they are already familiar. Since no one title can meet the needs and interests of all readers, the importance of supplementary texts and of bibliographies is manifest.

Thus there is some pragmatic value in continuing publication of bibliographies by ethnicity. On one hand, they serve as

endangered species lists, reminders of natural resources which are especially vulnerable to unnatural shifts in development. More positively, by identifying writers who have discrete cultural perspectives and unique stories to offer to our diverse and demanding young readers, they introduce our students to the variety of literature that is our authentic literary heritage. For scholars and teachers, they identify writers who might repay further scholarly investigation and they facilitate currency in the field. They make our commitment to a more authentic and inclusive canon of literature, and, ultimately, to a more honest and valuable understanding of our world and our possibilities easier to fulfill.

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